

# A framework for enabling graduate outcomes in undergraduate programmes

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# **Academic leaders' experiences of enabling graduate attributes in undergraduate programmes: a framework for engagement**

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## **Abstract**

As part of a larger study about enabling graduate outcomes in undergraduate programmes in tertiary institutions in Aotearoa/New Zealand, we used interviews to explore the experiences of ten academic leaders regarding institutional engagement with graduate outcomes. Using a general inductive approach, data analysis provided five categories of enablers and relevant strategies that leaders perceived influenced the development of graduate outcomes. They were external drivers, and structural/procedural, developmental, student achievement, and contextual enablers. The results were used to develop an integrating framework for institutional engagement in the development of graduate outcomes. The framework adopts a ‘whole of institution’ approach which is inclusive of programmes, staff and students and their individual histories, traditions, cultures and purposes thus allowing for each institution’s unique characteristics.

## **Keywords**

Undergraduate programmes; graduate outcomes; graduate attributes; enablers; framework; tertiary institutions; academic leaders.

## **Introduction**

Over the last two decades movement towards graduate outcomes in the tertiary sector has changed, revealing a complex interaction of a broad range of factors that influence institutional engagement. Note that we borrowed the term ‘engagement’ from the Kellogg

Commission (2000, p. 13) which refers to ‘institutions that have redesigned their teaching, research, and extension and service functions to become even more sympathetically and productively involved with their communities, however community may be defined’. In this case, our communities were those involved in different undergraduate programmes. Many of the influencing factors are rooted in forces that extend well beyond the institutions themselves. The political and economic effects of neo-liberalism have challenged higher education significantly, resulting in worldwide change typified by an evolving language that speaks of the development of human capital to meet the needs of a new knowledge economy. In Europe the ongoing development of comparable and compatible higher education systems and the alignment of curricular structures, programmes, teaching, specified learning outcomes and quality standards was driven by the Bologna Process, Dublin Descriptors and the Tuning Project (Bologna Declaration, 1999; González & Wagenaar, 2003; Kehm, 2010). In the USA, the Lumina Foundation began Tuning USA in 2008 (Adelman 2008a & b; Adelman et al., 2011) to increase sector accountability. In the UK, Dearing (1997) argued for a higher education sector that sustains a learning society geared to meet the demands of increasing societal change. In Australia, the outcomes movement evolved from a concern with key competencies and criticism of university preparation of graduates for the workplace (see Hager, et al., 2002).

Research on institutional involvement with graduate outcomes often focuses on the barriers, obstacles, constraints or challenges to implementation. For example, Jones (2009) identified a typology of epistemological, cultural, intrinsic, pedagogical, and structural barriers that reflect many included in other literature. De la Harpe et al., (2009) referred to obstacles that teachers report constrain engagement with graduate attributes in their teaching. They included lack of skill, time, resources, student readiness, and support, and over-bureaucratic management. From a specific disciplinary perspective, Campbell et al., (2009) drew attention to the challenge of traditional conceptions within curricula. A key factor is the location of the graduate profile. Is it generic to the institution, or programme-based, or both? Jones (2009) argued that a generic graduate profile is epistemologically and culturally isolated from the teacher. Whether generic or specific, staff perceived that graduate attributes are complex and difficult to define (Badcock, et al., 2010; Jones, 2009), difficult to integrate, or lack relevance to the curriculum (Campbell, et al., 2009; de la Harpe et al., 2009). Teachers' conceptual and attitudinal beliefs about teaching and learning and graduate attributes are also reported as enablers or constraints to their development (Barrie, 2006; de la Harpe et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, different frameworks for successful institutional implementation of graduate attributes tend to have a number of commonalities, including: organisational cultures that explicitly value teaching and learning; resources; 'strategic, focused, and supportive

leadership and management teams, and open lines of communication'; a whole programme approach to curriculum design (de la Harpe et al., 2009, p. 56; Willcoxson, Wynder & Laign, 2010); high priority on graduate outcome initiatives; time (at least two years); curriculum embedding (Sharp & Sparrow, 2002); and, professional development support for staff (de la Harpe et al., 2009; Sharp & Sparrow, 2002). Hughes and Barrie (2010) developed a pyramid of eight systematic determinants to the achieving of graduate outcomes. At its base is conceptualisation, followed by wide ranging consultation with stakeholders, and then implementation. Implementation includes staff development, curriculum mapping; assessment embedding; and quality assurance. At the top of the pyramid is student centredness – an active engagement with students about the meaning of graduate attributes and how they are assessed.

Despite a growing theoretical base, much of the research on engagement with graduate outcomes is concerned more with programmes (e.g., Bath et al., 2004; Kember, 2009; Smith & Bath, 2006; Spencer, Riddle & Knewstubb, 2011; Willcoxson, Wynder & Laign, 2010) than institutions, and is based on Australian or northern hemisphere experiences. The lack of research on graduate outcomes in Aotearoa/New Zealand prompted our study in which we explored institutional engagement across the tertiary sector, and what enabled such engagement. Previously, using a broad-based stocktake, we reported patchy engagement in which key enablers were external drivers, a teaching-focused culture, strong leadership, and

enabling structures (Spronken-Smith et al., 2013; 2015). Here, our aim was to determine what enabled institutions to engage with graduate outcomes in undergraduate programmes and to describe a framework that enabled such engagement. To clarify the terms we use: a graduate attribute is a single graduate outcome; a graduate profile is a collection of attributes. We distinguish generic institutional profiles from specific programme profiles and use graduate outcomes as an umbrella term for graduate descriptors.

## **Context**

Until 2013, graduate outcomes were regulated by two separate bodies in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP) was responsible for university degree programmes and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) accredited degree programmes in the remainder of the tertiary sector. Following a comprehensive review, the NZQA rationalised all qualifications and revised the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF, 2011). CUAP tended not to focus on outcome statements nor evidence of them being achieved. Now however, all degree-granting institutions must comply with the NZQF; all programmes must specify graduate profiles, as well as educational and employment pathways (NZQA, 2013).

## **Method**

To determine engagement with graduate outcomes in tertiary institutions in Aotearoa/New Zealand we used a mixed methods approach with three main parts:

1. A survey of senior or middle level academic leaders with responsibilities for teaching and learning across the 29 tertiary institutions (14 responded). The survey explored current policies and practices regarding graduate outcomes. The findings comprised the stocktake noted above and are reported elsewhere (Spronken-Smith et al., 2015).
2. Follow-up telephone interviews with 10 of the academic leaders who were surveyed (see above) in nine institutions (five polytechnics and four universities, with two leaders being interviewed at one university). Questions, designed to elicit the ideas and practices particular to each participant's institution typically focused on: their understanding of graduate outcomes; the institutional interpretation; the academic culture; how graduate outcomes were managed, in terms of processes and responsibilities; their design and their further development within department and/or programme; the current status of graduate outcomes in curricula; and, what enabled engagement with graduate outcomes.  
  
Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and checked by participants. Transcripts were analysed using a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006).
3. Case studies of good practice in engaging with graduate outcomes in programmes were conducted in: Applied Science and Broadcasting Communications (Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology), Design Innovation and Marketing (Victoria University of Wellington), Oral Health and Music (University of Otago), and Tourism, and Physiotherapy (AUT University). For each case, data were generated using surveys



and interviews, or focus groups with students and staff. Questions focused on: planning for graduate outcomes, and the links to learning outcomes, and assessment; staff and student awareness of graduate outcomes; and monitoring of achievement of outcomes. Quantitative data were tabulated and graphed and qualitative data were analysed using a general inductive approach.

### **Enabling engagement with graduate outcomes**

Analysis of the academic leaders' data (see 2 above) generated five categories of enablers that they perceived helped institutions engage with graduate outcomes. The enablers are illustrated using strategies identified by leaders that were used at different 'levels' within their institution. As the analysis proceeded, a framework began to become evident (reported in a later section). Therefore, in a few instances, descriptions were supplemented by survey (Part 1) and case study (Part 3) data (Spronken-Smith et al., 2013), and other literature. Qualitative data are coded numerically as P–polytechnic or U–university, or expressed as a ratio of polytechnics to universities (e.g., 4:2).

***External drivers*** were forces to which institutions were required to respond, perceived they were responding, or should respond to enable graduate outcome development. Key drivers were: requirements of statutory and/or professional accreditation bodies and trades organisations; potential students and enrolment; the educational market and institutional

branding; and international educational trends. External drivers and key strategies used to address them are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. External drivers and strategies that facilitated engagement with graduate outcomes

Level of engagement	Strategies
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attention to statutory accreditation bodies (NZQA, CUAP)</li> <li>• Focus on institutional branding and response to the educational market</li> <li>• Maintaining currency with international education trends</li> </ul>
Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandate from accreditation processes, professional bodies and trade organisations</li> <li>• Stakeholder involvement in developing GOs (employers, alumni, students) and programme advisory committees</li> <li>• Using alumni to help with programme quality</li> </ul>
Lecturer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Including alumni or external practitioners</li> <li>• Using ‘real world’ examples</li> <li>• Embedding learning in professional or discipline trends and practices</li> </ul>
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informative marketing strategies</li> <li>• Clear, highly visible links between GOs and employability skills and attributes</li> </ul>

GOs – graduate outcomes

Almost all leaders referred to the influence of professional accreditation bodies, especially in nursing, physiotherapy, oral health, or business (e.g., with the Institute of Professional Engineers (IPENZ) or the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). However, polytechnic leaders more often referred to statutory accreditation bodies (5:1), and relations with employer groups (4:1). The latter facilitated the ongoing development of programme graduate profiles to provide ‘some clarity for employers’ (P2); and the inclusion of employer representatives on internal programme committees to give feedback (P5). P3 emphasised their work on ‘robust stakeholder engagement’ with a focus on aligning qualifications with ‘what stakeholders need and expect, institute expectations and

also what students want to learn'. Despite this comment, only three leaders, all from polytechnics, referred to the needs/interests of potential students and the extent of enrolment levels.

Other external drivers were institutional branding, location in the educational market and the level of competition experienced by the institution (4:2). For P3, threatened institutional viability was a significant enabler, evidenced by the most well developed institutional initiatives in the development of graduate profiles and supporting structures in the sample.

*Structural/procedural enablers* facilitated or engaged staff and communities within the institution to become aware of, or work towards change in practice in relation to graduate outcomes. Structural enablers were the tangible institutional arrangements such as key management positions, committees, plans, and policies that were set up to support educational processes and facilitate institutional change. They were evident in new appointments which were made in recognition of the larger context in which graduate outcomes and their development were located, and an anticipation of the impact on the institution of the changes required by that context. Procedural enablers were the actions and mandated activities that facilitated the implementation of plans and policies and provided feedback data. The structural and procedural enablers are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Structural/procedural enablers of institution-wide engagement with graduate outcomes

Level of engagement	Strategies
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having strong proactive senior leadership for GO initiatives</li> <li>• Appointing key senior leaders supportive of GO initiatives</li> <li>• Promoting a senior management team focus on GOs</li> <li>• Requiring curriculum renewal with a focus on GOs</li> <li>• Changing roles of committees to ensure active promotion of and engagement with GOs</li> <li>• Instigating policies and plans that include GPs</li> <li>• Giving staff designated authority to implement policy</li> <li>• Allowing time for curriculum renewal</li> <li>• Overseeing and evaluating monitoring process</li> </ul>
Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive middle managers responsible for teaching and learning</li> <li>• Promoting a team focus to curriculum development</li> <li>• Having designated authority to implement policy</li> <li>• Having people familiar with regulatory and structural aspects of qualifications</li> <li>• Developing programme specific GPs</li> <li>• Requiring clear links between programme GP and institutional GP (where it exists)</li> <li>• Requiring strong links between GOs, learning outcomes and assessment (curriculum mapping)</li> <li>• Evaluating achievement of GPs</li> </ul>
Lecturer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to information/people about regulatory and structural aspects of their programme</li> <li>• Teaching awards/promotion criteria/annual reviews that recognise and reward efforts to embed GOs</li> <li>• Guidelines for mapping the attributes to learning objectives and then to specific assessment and learning tasks</li> </ul>
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear articulation of learning outcomes and assessment with GOs</li> <li>• Involvement of students in developing GPs</li> <li>• Online, paper-based and verbal information aimed at students</li> <li>• Structures and procedures in place to allow flexibility for study and programme completion</li> </ul>

GOs – graduate outcomes

GPs – graduate profiles

The effectiveness of the structural enablers lay in the way that they were related systemically to processes that enabled the implementation of the policy and practices they espoused. So appointments and committees became procedural enablers when roles included

authority to implement and monitor formal and informal curriculum and quality-assurance functions. Yet, in all the data, structural enablers were more evident than procedural enablers.

Two thirds of the leaders referred to senior leadership. Three emphasised the need for a strong, proactive senior leadership or senior management team (P3, U2/1, U4). Several institutions created new positions, or restructured appointments to senior leadership with responsibilities for leading change and engagement with graduate outcomes including: appointments of a new vice-chancellor (U2), a new chief executive (P3), a new senior management position (U2), a senior manager of programme design and development (P6), and an institutional project (U2/1, U2/2). These appointments were the procedural mechanisms to facilitate change. Their roles were to steer ‘the whole institute - the whole senior management team were on board with this direction’, and give staff confidence in the revised curricula (P3). At U2, the involvement of senior staff illustrated the importance of the activities, and kept staff focused for the length of time required to ‘do the job well’.

Enablers also included the appointment of middle managers of teaching and learning such as academic advisors (P2; P3; P4) or associate deans (U2; U4; U6) in schools or departments. Some roles were merely administrative but others were more formally concerned with quality assurance. For example, at U2 before the reforms staff with such responsibilities ‘were familiar with regulatory and structural aspects of qualifications’ but the

roles of new directors of teaching and learning appointed within faculties focused on teaching and teachers.

Departmental and institutional committees with responsibilities for teaching, learning, curricula and graduate outcome development were key enablers. Some were newly established in a graduate outcome initiative and others were existing committees assuming new roles. Most committees comprised senior academic leaders, though one steering group included a mixture of senior and middle managers, an academic developer and a lecturer. Not all committees were both structural and procedural, though there was evidence of change with committees taking 'a much stronger role [that will] have a significant impact' (U2). It was the appointment of a senior manager of teaching and learning who 'made it a much stronger body' and enabled them to develop 'a teaching and learning framework' and support 'a major curriculum reform process' (U2/1).

At U4 other procedural enablers included the non-negotiable involvement of associate deans (Teaching and Learning) and heads of departments in programme development, and formal recognition of the workload involved for course coordinators. The inter-relatedness of the structural with the procedural enablers was evident in the establishment of an educational centre (P4), in which all programme approvals required input from a centre academic developer.

Other structural enablers included policies and teaching and learning plans that included a graduate profile. The extent to which these structural enablers were also procedural was less clear, though five leaders referred to implementation arrangements and monitoring processes. Procedural enablers, such as staff with designated authority to implement policy, and the presence of oversight and monitoring processes were also less visible. These roles were usually attributed to middle/senior managers.

*Development enablers* were academic activities located at all levels of the institution that assisted staff/programme teams to introduce and develop graduate outcomes and embed them in curricula, or undertake curriculum development. They included: beliefs/attitudes; academic development support; strategic initiatives; staff ownership of graduate outcome initiatives; and, recognition of the time required for change (see summary Table 3).

The beliefs/attitudes about the institutional role, graduate outcomes, and teaching and learning appeared to influence institutional practices at all levels, and the further development of a graduate outcome agenda. Their influence was evident in: choices about the use of a generic or specific graduate profiles; ways in which graduate outcomes were developed (i.e., top-down, bottom-up, or both); recognition of disciplinary effects in the selection of attributes and importance of specific qualities; focus on the whole programme rather than parts; a focus on outcomes and the means to achieve them; and, ownership the development of the attributes.

Table 3. Development enablers of institution-wide engagement with graduate outcomes

Level of engagement	Strategies
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarifying and promoting the institutional role as it relates to the GPP</li> <li>• Explicit articulation of beliefs<sup>1</sup> about the role of GOs, teaching and learning</li> <li>• Academic development support through: facilitating curriculum meetings; workshops on GOs; providing exemplars of embedding of GOs; providing tools to assist in curriculum renewal</li> <li>• Identifying champions</li> <li>• Implementing high profile strategic institutional projects</li> <li>• Recognising the time required for change</li> </ul>
Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit articulation of beliefs<sup>1</sup> about the role of GOs, teaching and learning</li> <li>• Identifying champions</li> <li>• Acknowledging and supporting the discipline and its culture in developing/embedding GOs</li> <li>• Recognising and supporting staff ownership of their programme</li> <li>• Engaging all staff in curriculum renewal</li> <li>• Valuing programme staff input</li> <li>• Academic development for the process and particularly for developing learning outcomes</li> <li>• Provision of teaching resources and planning tools e.g., curriculum mapping</li> <li>• Instigating formal and informal conversations about teaching and curriculum</li> <li>• Having good communication of the process and outcomes</li> <li>• Emphasising that improved efficiency will result</li> </ul>
Lecturer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Translation<sup>1</sup> or enabling beliefs<sup>1</sup> about the role of GOs, teaching and learning</li> <li>• Promoting collective ownership of the programme</li> <li>• Being committed to curriculum renewal</li> <li>• Recognising the discipline</li> <li>• Access to teaching resources</li> <li>• Supportive teaching culture</li> <li>• Seeing curriculum change as a positive process</li> </ul>
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for students in the development of their expectations and outcomes (knowledge and skills) of programme</li> <li>• Teaching environment that encourages students' awareness of the importance of access to knowledge of the benefits of the programme</li> <li>• Curriculum designed for contemporary/flexible delivery methods that take account of busy lives</li> <li>• Student-centred teaching that focuses on learning</li> <li>• Specific GOs explicit in every part of the curriculum</li> <li>• Curriculum includes high-impact experiences to help graduates foster GOs</li> <li>• Scaffolding of skills made explicit to students to help their awareness of development</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> See Barrie (2006)



The universities tended to adopt more generic profiles, and programme profiles were developed from top down using the generic profile as a template (U2; U6). However, there was concern that generic profiles and outcomes failed to distinguish graduates across programmes, and also the unique characteristics of institutions (U2). In other institutions generic attributes were less evident. The polytechnics, which were more vocationally oriented and influenced by the NZQF, used programme profiles to produce ‘more specific graduates with more specific sorts of employment pathways’. Graduate profiles were embedded in the programmes (P4). Embedding included the identification of programme outcomes, their specific qualities, and their development in disciplinary knowledge, cultures and practices (U2/2). For instance, the knowledge focus of ‘science-based programmes’ differed from the more consensual social work programme (P5): the social workers were ‘quite creative in what they’ve done’ reflecting ‘their philosophy of work’ where ‘everything is agreed’. These enablers were affected by the ‘entrenchment of longer serving staff’ (P3), ‘mindsets’ (P3; P4) and the ‘reluctance to change and invest in new ideas’ (P4).

Five leaders referred to ownership of development processes; the need to be ‘teacher driven’ and ‘ensure that the decisions’ though managed ‘are made by the teachers in the programme’ (U4). Another argued: ‘They’ve got to take ownership of it. It’s their programme. Our role is arguing – these are the principles of the institution and we need to be seeing these sorts of evidence’ (P4). The challenge was to have the initiative seen as

‘improvement driven, rather than compliance driven’ (U2). Feedback and consequential action was also important (P5).

All the leaders identified staff/academic developers as enablers who worked with staff at all levels to advise (U2/1), inform, challenge (P4) provoke, guide and support (U4).

Support ranged from providing advice on research trends, and/or using academic leaders’ forums for, ‘creating a context where these discussions could happen’ (U2/1), to work with programme teams and individuals. Developers were characterised as colleagues who could ‘provoke in a positive way, lead and facilitate the conversation and deal with some of the issues and challenges’ both political and personal and ‘get them energised’ (U4).

Promotion of further development at programme level was supported by strategic initiatives in seven of the nine institutions. Two main kinds were evident. There were formal, institutionally-based projects that aimed at different levels but with the intention of having wide recognition and characterised by high profile names: the Pathways Project, the Academic Reform Project, or the Graduate Attributes Project. Projects were institutionally funded, often including a management group, and specific resources. The second kind, although often institutionally or departmentally mandated, was less visible, comprising more normative staff development. Typically, workshops (either with programme teams or more generically embedded in the institution’s staff development programme) were used to help staff to disentangle what was meant by graduate attributes (U5). In polytechnics, workshops

and meetings with programme teams sometimes included stakeholder input. Work with programme teams involved identifying graduate outcomes, mapping them into courses, identifying learning outcomes, and aligning them with assessment. Other examples included: the identification of champions with leadership potential or experienced enthusiast groups, piloting changes in selected programmes, the development of outcome exemplars, borrowing existing frameworks from elsewhere, the development of templates for use by curriculum teams, and the development of shared teaching resources. Often, the focus extended beyond graduate outcomes. For instance, U6 used graduate outcomes ‘as a tool for bringing about curriculum change’ by facilitating ‘conversations within departments and programmes to help staff ‘think about the bigger picture, what are they trying to do. To think about their courses in a more holistic way in terms of knowledge, skill and attributes development’ (U6). All the staff development and strategic initiatives were enablers devised to encourage staff buy-in and engagement with the graduate outcome agenda.

Reference was made to the need for time for developing programme profiles and embedding graduate attributes (P3, P4, P5, U2, U4), having multiple iterations (P4) and for reflection and feedback (P2). Curriculum renewal was often a two-three year process (P5), ‘primarily about creating space for staff to think outside of what they’ve always been doing and think about the future ways of doing things’ (U2).

**Student achievement enablers** were those that enabled students to achieve graduate outcomes.

Only three were evident in the leaders' data: clear educational/employment pathways;

contemporary, flexible delivery methods; and curriculum frameworks that focus on students.

Other enablers include high impact educational experiences (Kuh, 2008), and the

encouragement of relevant extra-curricula activities. These are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Student achievement enablers for institution-wide engagement with graduate outcomes

Level of engagement	Strategies
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing an institutionally supported ePortfolio framework</li> <li>• Providing advice and mentoring for students</li> <li>• Providing signature learning experiences (Spronken-Smith, 2013)</li> </ul>
Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having clear educational and employment pathways</li> <li>• Using contemporary/flexible delivery methods</li> <li>• Ensuring curricula focus on students</li> <li>• Having strong links between GOs, learning outcomes and assessment</li> <li>• Scaffolding of skills – to gradually develop GOs</li> <li>• Including high-impact educational experiences (<i>e.g.</i> service learning, inquiry, Kuh, 2008)</li> <li>• Requiring ePortfolios</li> <li>• Involvement of students in developing GPs</li> </ul>
Lecturer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion of educational and employment pathways for graduates</li> <li>• Clearly articulating links between GOs, learning outcomes and assessment</li> <li>• Using signature pedagogies (Shulman,2005; Spronken-Smith, 2013) and high-impact educational experiences (Kuh, 2008)</li> <li>• Assignments which require reflection on learning and articulation of the knowledge, skills and values being developed</li> </ul>
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear and explicit educational and employment pathways</li> <li>• Access to contemporary, flexible delivery methods</li> <li>• Strong, explicit links between GOs, learning outcomes and assessment</li> <li>• Experience of student-focused curricula: teaching assessment and evaluation</li> <li>• Personal contact with relevant staff</li> <li>• Encouraging extra-curricular activities</li> </ul>

Most leaders referred to communicating clear educational/employment pathways to students: ‘why a programme has been set up and what students can expect’ (P6). P6 used fact sheets and described programme expectations so that students ‘know what they’re coming into and what the likely pathways are’. They tended ‘not to have a lot of students dropping out’. A graduate profile was seen as something ‘that students can rely on’ and from which all the rest of the programme evolves. At P6 students also meet the people that are going to teach them. Students need to be able to understand what they can do with their education (U2; U6). For example, U6 was personally motivated to work with graduate attributes because students ‘can’t articulate what they’re getting out of a university education’. Yet despite these comments, all the institutions appeared to rely on written information (either on-line or through brochures or programme books) as their main means of communicating course requirements to students.

Three leaders referred to the use of flexible delivery methods as an enabler: ‘so that people can work full-time and study either at night or online or block courses’ (P2); and working with employers to allow students to complete their qualifications after they gained employment (P3).

***Contextual enablers*** were those generic institutional and/or individual cultural qualities that crossed enablers 1-4 above and made them more or less effective. They reflected the

emotional health of the institution, staff morale, and confidence in themselves and their leadership. Unlike other more concrete enablers, these were more ephemeral and difficult to unpack. Contextual enablers are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Contextual enablers for institution-wide engagement with graduate outcomes

Level of engagement	Strategy
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promoting the positive emotional health of the institution</li> <li>• Good communication</li> <li>• An institutional culture that focuses on student learning</li> <li>• Giving GOs a high profile</li> <li>• Being alert to the context of programmes and programme coordinators</li> <li>• Creating space for discussions on GOs and how to embed them</li> </ul>
Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High staff morale</li> <li>• Good communication</li> <li>• A departmental culture that focuses on teaching</li> <li>• Creating time and space for discussions for curriculum renewal</li> <li>• Being alert to the context of lecturers</li> </ul>
Lecturer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouragement and support for a student-centred approach to teaching</li> <li>• Working in an institution/department that values GOs</li> <li>• Valuing staff and providing positive working context</li> <li>• Providing positive feedback</li> </ul>
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having visible GPs</li> <li>• Having GPs that make sense</li> <li>• Discussing the purpose of higher education</li> <li>• A student-centred institutional/programme culture with a strong emphasis on pastoral care</li> <li>• Personal contact with relevant staff</li> <li>• Explicit interest shown in graduate destinations</li> </ul>

Evidence was drawn from leaders' descriptions of their institutional context and its beliefs and practices. P2 commented that some years previously the institution was performing poorly and had low student numbers. There was a need for a 'quite drastic

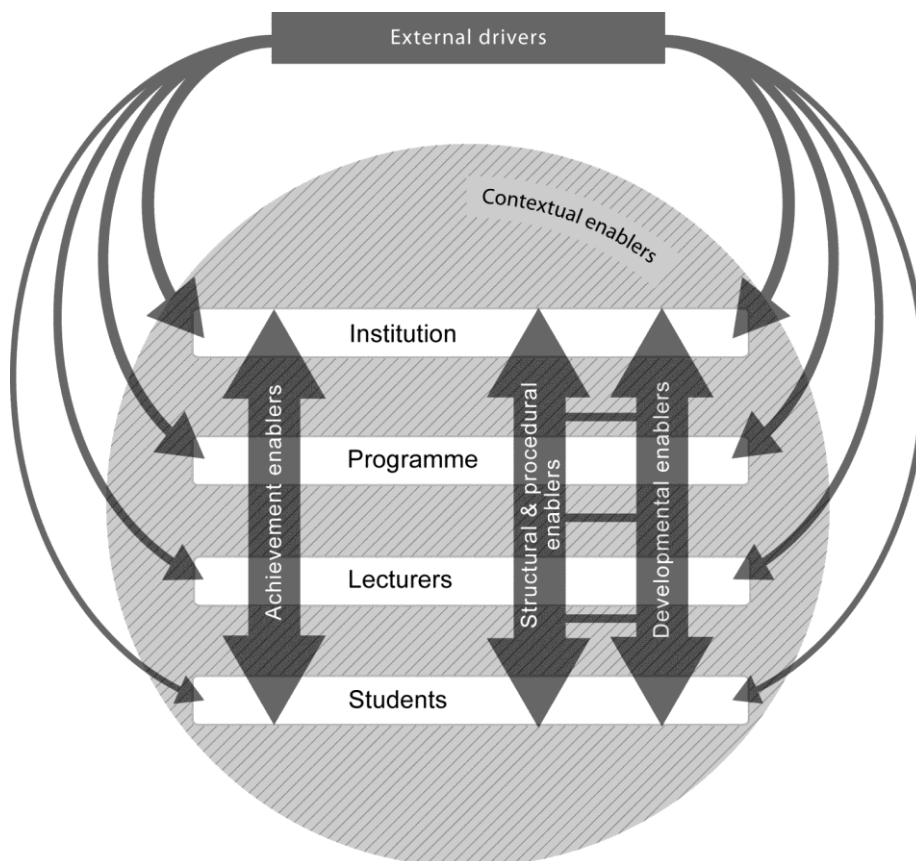
turnaround in how we approached our business'. P2 described the process starting with 'a number of appointments and a revamp of the whole senior management team'. The strategic direction of the institution changed and 'became very much student and stakeholder focused' and they had now 'more than doubled in size in the last five years'. There were challenges, constraints on facilities and teaching staff but the outcome is a 'much more vibrant institution and staff feel more confident in the curricula that they're delivering because of the quality drive that has taken place in terms of the development' (P2). Another contextual enabler was the need for 'creating space for staff to think outside of what they've always been doing' (U2/2) and focus on future structures and processes with a whole programme focus rather than individual teachers and courses.

Leaders also alluded to good communication, an institutional culture with a focus on teaching and learning, an institutional space that valued all its occupants, thoughtful practices, and the provision of positive feedback. For example, one leader talked of respecting staff and the 'sheer workload' in a busy department, recognising that 'there are times of the year in which it becomes impossible to promote movement' and to 'recognise that and we work around that constraint' (U4).

## A framework for enabling institution wide engagement with graduate outcomes

The five categories of enablers show complex organic inter-relations that appear critically balanced across the institution, programme, teachers and students which comprise a qualitative base for a framework that encapsulates institution wide engagement with graduate outcomes. The framework is presented diagrammatically in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of enabling institution-wide engagement with graduate outcomes



The external drivers influenced all aspects of graduate outcomes at the institution, programme, lecturer and student levels. Yet, they were often implicit or invisible, especially to students. The four internal enablers also showed strong inter-relationships. The



effectiveness of the structural enablers depended on how well they were related to the processes that enabled the implementation of policy and practices. The structural often became the procedural in this enactment. However, most leaders talked only of the many structural enablers in their institution but failed to mention the procedural enablers – the how of the enterprise. The data indicate that an engaged institution requires the two to co-exist and work together at each level of the framework. Our results also suggest that structures should be established before new functions are required, and that new functions allocated to established structures should be well communicated across all levels of the institution. The existence or not of the structural/procedural enablers influenced the effectiveness of possible development and student achievement enablers and their outcomes. So the effect of the relationship is cumulative. At the heart of the framework are the contextual enablers providing the organic matter that supports the whole; the basis of the motivation, energy and enthusiasm. The strategies that support the framework are probably context-specific and recognisable in any strong learning environment without reference to graduate outcomes.

## **Discussion**

Though not the focus of the study, the results highlighted the differences between two kinds of degree granting institutions. The study occurred in Aotearoa/New Zealand when the degree programmes of some tertiary institutions were subject to more external regulation than

others. External drivers, particularly accrediting bodies, were a powerful enabler in the polytechnic sector but less so in the universities, with the exception of vocational programmes. There was a relative lack of engagement with graduate outcomes in the universities and evidence of less effective internal enablers (see also Spronken-Smith, et al., 2015).

Changes in role and control of accrediting bodies also influenced how institutional and programme graduate profiles evolved in different institutions. In polytechnics, the shift to programme graduate profiles was triggered by the NZQA reforms, reflecting moves elsewhere. However, the universities lacked this framework. The use of a generic graduate profile was more common in universities and it showed at the institutional, programme, staff and student levels with less specific graduate descriptions that were disconnected from specific programmes, culturally and pedagogically (see also Campbell, 2009; de la Harpe, 2009).

Internally, this situation was conflated by the different roles assumed by the two kinds of institutions. The polytechnics with their more explicit vocational focus prioritised teaching, and this was itself an enabler. Leaders referred to the research focus of universities and the differences this possibly contributed to staff attitudes to graduate outcomes. These differences become even more complex when institutional beliefs about teaching and learning (see also Barrie, 2006) and the resulting cultures are taken into account.

Institutions with a strong teaching-focused culture appeared better placed to embed graduate outcomes at all levels. Student achievement enablers influence all levels of their experience, yet, leaders' interview data suggested an overall lack of engagement with students and their needs and students were scarcely mentioned. This result reflects Hughes and Barrie's (2010) criticism of attempts to embed graduate outcomes without active engagement of students as partners in the process. In contrast to the interview data, our case studies suggested that, within programmes, more attention was being paid to students and their needs. However, students also reported that they were not as aware of graduate outcomes as they would like, so further efforts should be taken to address this.

These results reflect some of those that have previously been identified as necessary for a successful implementation of graduate outcomes (e.g., Hughes & Barrie, 2010; Sharp & Sparrow, 2002). Reference to structures *and* procedures is not new (e.g., Sharp and Sparrow, 2002), but the relation between the two and application across the four levels is not mentioned elsewhere. An institutional focus on external influences and internal structures rather than processes may also account for the Barrie, Hughes and Smith's (2009, p.6) comment that 'the sector has produced little convincing evidence of authentic curriculum integration or of impact on student learning'. They argued that this phenomenon exists because the end part of the process is not occurring. Similarly, in our interview data there was little reference to

assessment, evaluation and monitoring and our survey results found that the assessment and monitoring of graduate outcomes is poor (Spronken-Smith et al., 2015).

The results have limitations: a small cohort of leaders expressing personal views. Indeed, we found graduate outcomes and curriculum change to be highly politicized so it was unsurprising that interviewees and survey respondents argued that their views were personal rather than professional. Yet the cohort represents 31% of higher education institutions in Aotearoa/New Zealand; the data were substantial; the leaders were influential in tertiary education in Aotearoa/New Zealand; the different data collection methods and target groups in the larger study allowed triangulation of the results (see Spronken-Smith, et al., 2013), and these results align well with those of the survey and case study data, and with other literature. However, representation from wānanga (higher education institutions for Māori) was missing and should be included in future research, especially in the further development and applicability of the framework.

## **Conclusions**

In this research we explored what enabled nine tertiary institutions in Aotearoa/New Zealand to engage with graduate outcomes in undergraduate programmes. The result was a five component framework comprising: external drivers; and structural/procedural, developmental, student achievement, and contextual enablers. Individually, all the components are

recognisable aspects of institutional life and each has the power to influence those aspects.

They form part of academic experience. Indeed, they were constructed from the experiences of academic leaders, together with our previously published findings (Spronken-Smith et al., 2015) and other literature. The framework illustrates the inter-relatedness of the different parts; how each enabler in its representation and enaction influences the whole.

Literature on graduate outcomes has tended to distinguish between institution-wide or programme based graduate profiles, and more recent literature has emphasised a whole of programme approach (e.g., de la Harpe, et al.. 2009). Our framework and the supporting evidence provides a different kind of argument, one that encompasses a whole of institution approach that is inclusive of a whole of programme approach. It is a starting place that allows a relationship to be developed between the two. Moreover, although each institution's framework will include key enabler types, they will be developed within the context of that institution's history, traditions, cultures and purposes. It is a framework that can potentially help institutions to think about developing and shaping its graduates at different levels and also identify its unique institutional characteristics. Further research will perhaps show these relationships more clearly.

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